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**ABSTRACT**

The specific space of a comics convention has affected the design and methods of my qualitative social science research into readers' readings of British comics. In this early-stage paper I first provide context to the comics convention (in this instance Thought Bubble in Leeds, UK) as a space not only for commerce and networking but also for research fieldwork. I then advance my comics-format questionnaire from my own intertwined identity as a researcher and practitioner, as an innovative data collection method that is well suited to the convention environment. Finally, in the context of the Prevent strategy's reductive attempt to define Fundamental British Values I question whose voices are heard in defining 'British comics', a category for which there is no definitive list. Approaching the study of comics at the level of a medium goes beyond any single genre, format, or fandom affiliation, which have previously operated as constraints. Connecting the study of comics with sociocultural theories of language opens a connection between what readers read and how this influences their own understandings and constructions of national identity. As such I cautiously advance a critical social science approach to researching readers' choices of what they read.

KEYWORDS: British comics, sociocultural, reading, methods, comics convention, questionnaire

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT: In accordance with Taylor & Francis policy and my ethical obligation as a researcher I note here my ongoing practice as a comics creator and publisher. I do not consider this a conflict of interest. An earlier version of this paper was presented at Comics Forum conference (Leeds, 2017).

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Lydia Wysocki is an educational researcher and founder of Applied Comics Etc. She is pursuing her PhD in Education at Newcastle University (ESRC/NEDTC funded), which is provisionally titled 'British comics, British values?', and explores readers' readings of specific British comics 2005-17. She also makes comics.

WORD COUNT: 6837

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**Linking research and practice: qualitative social science data collection at a UK comics convention**

**Introduction**

Taking part in comics conventions is hard work. The physical and mental energy expended on the day is but a snapshot of the long process of creating comics and presenting them to readers, to say nothing of the teams of convention organisers who support each event. There is a parallel here with the processes of empirical research: from planning to doing to dissemination, as a mix of solitary and shared work. Doing research fieldwork at a comics convention and using methods that include comics I have made is, I argue, a way to be open about my professional identity as both educational researcher and comics creator. I will start by building a description of Thought Bubble Festival comics convention in Leeds, UK, as an energetic and lively space, then turn to my use of a comics format questionnaire as a research data collection instrument in this convention setting. This is contextualised by questions of what counts as a British comic, as a window into wider questions of national identity as a key contemporary discourse. My focus is thus on how what readers read influences their constructions of identity, and how their constructions of identity influences their understandings of what they read.

**Part 1: The comics convention as a space for research**

Conceptualising the comics convention as a space offers a rich description (Geertz 1973) that goes beyond seeing it as merely an event. It is 'a periodic social economy' (Norcliffe and Rendance 2003), important within the decentralised ecosystem of comics production noting the absence of a single cohesive commercial space for the creation and sale of comics. Social and economic relations also happen outside this space, but the semi-regular calendar of comics events in the UK offer particularly important spaces to carry out and renew these relations. Kahler (2015) characterised comics conventions as one of Auge's (1992) non-places: referring to both the physical space formed for specific ends, and to individuals' relations with that space, Kahler's (*ibid.*) convention is a social and commercial space with specific rules and entry requirements but elements of uncertainty compared with participants' everyday lives. The comics convention weekend of the annual Thought Bubble Festival in Leeds, UK, uses a system of convention wristbands checked by door staff as gatekeepers, fulfilling the function of uniformed bouncers or border guards; from at least 2010 to 2016 a proportion of the door staff have been members of local Roller Derby groups, their team sportswear and rollerskates contributing to their exercise of authority within the somewhat carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1968) atmosphere.

My main reason for using a comics convention as a place to meet and recruit comics readers to my research project is that it is a place (or non-place) where people interested in comics come to access comics and talk about comics. Purely by scale it offers higher footfall and potentially a larger geographic catchment area than a local comics shop or library. This introduces an element of uncertainty to who these readers are, what they read, and with whom they discuss their reading. I make no pretence to recruiting a demographically representative selection of readers, but a large event at least offers an opportunity to meet readers beyond my own local and national networks. It would however be naïve to say this removes a reliance on my own social capital (Bourdieu 1994; Siisiäinen 2000). As an individual researcher I cannot control for potential respondents' perceptions of who I am and what I want: my appearance, name, and examples of comics work could attract or repel convention attendees. Indeed, it is only through my continued practice as a comics creator and publisher that I have come to research this topic, in this way, at this time. My intertwined practitioner-researcher identity is central to this project.

This begins to show how the specifics of Thought Bubble, not any other comics convention, have already affected my research design. It remains a comics-focussed convention encompassing a range of genres and publication formats, rather than diversifying into other entertainment industries as other large events have done. It takes place once a year, affecting my research project timeline: 2017's convention dates were a month earlier than in 2016. Previous years' attendance data is not available; anecdotally, Thought Bubble attracts attendees and stallholders nationally and internationally as well as from within day-trip travel distance. Whilst Thought Bubble's convention map lists stallholders by name my concern is less that potential respondents recognise me and my comics work by name, and more that they recognise my work as rooted in comics. My intention is to build trust in me as someone with a genuine interest in comics, not an bandwagon-jumping outsider now that we are told comics are mainstream cool (Kim 2015), or otherwise insincere (Berlatsky 2013). Indeed, Thought Bubble convention stalls are oversubscribed and in recent years the convention moved from a first-come first-served to a semi-curated booking system: having exhibited in previous years and submitting examples from my back catalogue of individual and collaborative comics projects still gave me only scant confidence that my application for this convention would be accepted. Having a stall would not inevitably legitimate my research in the eyes of attendees but at least showed I complied with the application process, my exhibitor wristband evidencing a status somewhere below that of an invited special guest.

My stall location was beyond my control. In previous years it has been possible to express a preference for one of the multiple halls in New Dock Hall/Royal Armouries convention complex, but

no influence over where a table is within that hall: too close to a doorway for attendees to linger, in a distant corner to which not all attendees venture, or next to the bins. The continued expansion and evolution of Thought Bubble however meant a change of location for the convention in 2017 from the established but oversubscribed convention complex to a number of city centre venues incorporating both hard-shell marquees and permanent buildings. This changed my fieldwork plans. My allocated convention table was in a hard-shell marquee outside Leeds Town Hall, next to Leeds City Library, raising questions of the extent to which the convention could still be conceptualised as a non-place now surrounded by everyday life in Leeds city centre. My initial plan was for two fieldwork locations: the comics convention at the New Dock Hall/Royal Armouries complex on the edge of Leeds city centre, and on separate days a separate location at Leeds City Library in the city centre. Without implying a comparative research design or attempting an experimental sampling strategy, this dual location approach could have offered an opportunity to approach respondents who did and did not self-identify as comics readers. The new city centre location cast doubt over whether a dual convention centre/library fieldwork location would be meaningful, particularly combined with the convention organisers' stated aim to appeal 'to both long-time comic book fans and those who have never picked up a graphic novel before!' (Thought Bubble Festival, 2017). Moreover, it is not inevitable that people at a comics convention are comics readers. Attendees might be accompanying friends or family rather than themselves identifying as comics readers. Whilst the change of space might be of keen interest to a social geographer, as an educational researcher my focus has been not on the number or comparability of responses but on the quality of my interactions with comics readers. My non-probability convenience sample prioritises specific understanding over statistical generalisability of findings, and factors beyond my control - weather, the convention events schedule, and queues from other people's stalls - might have affected footfall patterns. This recruitment is mainly a stepping stone to build the connections that will afford access to richer data from group interviews, with limited data collection at this recruitment stage.

**Part 2: Methods as a researcher and practitioner**

The key themes in my research are the intertwined social constructs of race and class (Leonardo and Manning 2017; Leonardo 2012), using sociocultural theories of learning to explore how these affect comics readers' constructions of national identity. Studying part-time meant that my first stage of PhD study stretched over a period which included the Brexit referendum and still-unfolding Brexit process. But when did this period of heightened discourse of national identity start? My stated themes suggested the 2005 London Bombings (7/7), as a focus not only on nationalist sentiment but

on representations of this nationalist sentiment in the media: who and what is presented as British, or as not British enough. This already built on a longer focus on citizenship (Crick 1998) through waves of political and social responses to waves of migration (Fryer 1984) particularly after two world wars, the formation and decline of the British Empire, and the Victorian nation-building of 'Britain' as four countries combined into a political union (Colley 1992). A European context is particularly important in showing the role of comics in representing national, religious, and ethnic identity in this period, notably the 2006 Muhammad cartoons controversy in Denmark and the 2015 Charlie Hebdo shootings in France. I explore this issue of national identity further detail in Part 3 of this paper. For brevity this paper focuses on my methods with light references to theories explored more thoroughly elsewhere in my project, though with the caution that a focus on methods alone without first thoroughly exploring the theoretical issues risks reinforcing, rather than exposing and challenging, existing social inequities.

My 2005-2017 timeline focuses on a particularly vivid, particularly comics-focussed, snapshot of longer-standing issues of how British national identity is constructed. Much has happened in this timescale, as Wikipedia's UK news timelines for each year reminded me. Well aware of the fallibility of this accessible source of information, I used a selection of events listed in these articles as prompts to remind me of some of what had happened, and adapted these into a timeline comic as part of my recruitment questionnaire to contextualise the question of 'what comics did you read at this time?' with events in the news. This comic timeline itself remains fallible, as does my drawing of what I chose to include. I was amused when I realised I had space to position the London sewer fatberg above Margaret Thatcher's head: I could have changed the composition, but chose not to. I worried about how to respectfully depict mass killings, particularly those that did not acquire a widely-shared logo-type image or hashtag (Grenfell; Charlie Hebdo) and those that did not (Tunisia beach shootings; Jean-Charles de Menezes).


**Figure 1: Timeline comic 2005-2017**

This timeline comic forms part of my initial recruitment questionnaire, all in comics form (fig. 1, and hosted as supplementary material). As a comics creator and social science academic researcher my comics making and academic work are linked (Johnston 2016). My interest in visual research methods (Clark *et al.* 2013) and my practice as a comics creator and publisher predate my turn towards academic comics work (Wysocki 2012), and indeed contributed to it. Bringing these interests together is an opportunity to explore what comics can offer as a research method, not only as the communication of research outputs. This is by no means an isolated interest – see also McNicol (2017), Bailey (2016), Gallacher and Gallacher (2008) – but as yet an emergent field. Creating my recruitment questionnaire as a comic is both innovative as a research method, and a way of signalling my overlapping researcher-practitioner identity when conducting my initial fieldwork at a comics convention. Fig 2 shows my stall layout, with research at the left half of the photo and other solo and collaborative comics to the right. This includes: display materials to introduce my research; comics-format questionnaires (A3 folded to A4 size, on A3 clipboards); original panel artwork from my timeline comic mounted on foam core board (as display materials, and as a 'large print' version of this comic); debrief sheets as folded comics; stickers ('I took part in research about comics at table LTH 37') to thank participants for completing my questionnaire and to promote my project as they walked around the convention.

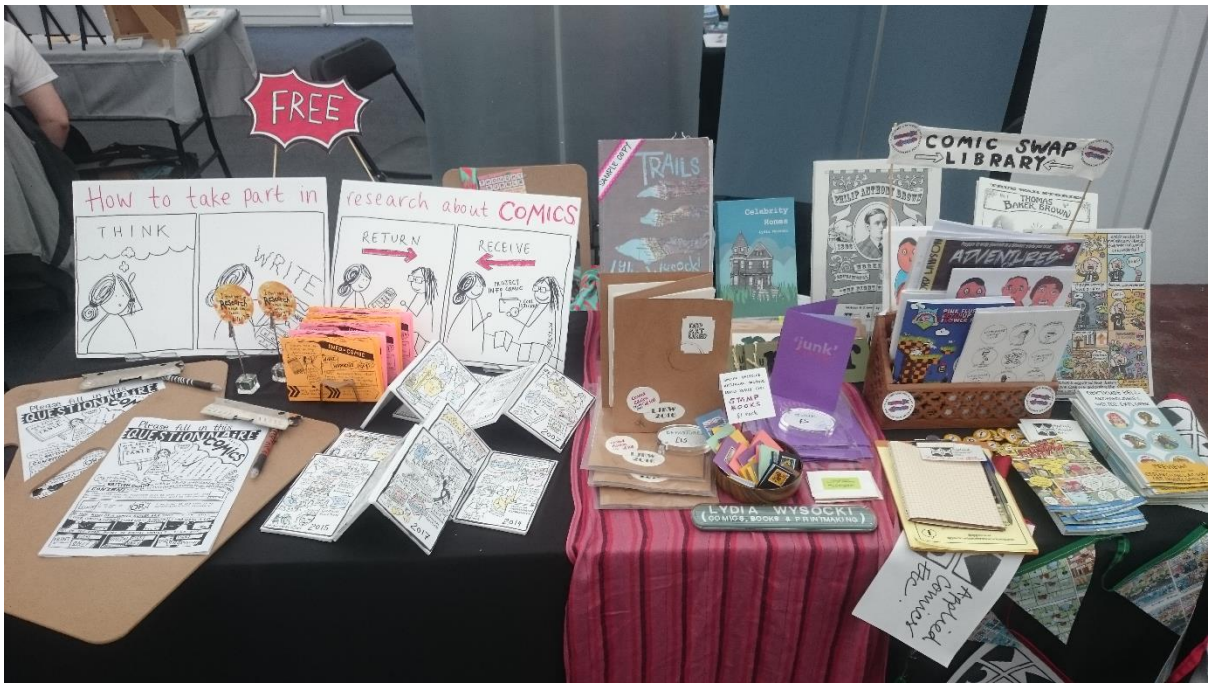


**Figure 2: My stall layout at Thought Bubble 2017, Leeds Town Hall Marquee table 37**

There are many reasons not to do research at a comics convention. Having previously exhibited my individual and collaborative comics at UK comics events I know they can be noisy and busy venues, not suited to indepth discussions of complex issues. Thinking of this environment it is perhaps unsurprising that the few examples of scholarly research conducted at comics conventions have tended towards positivistic research approaches. Cohn's (2014) research into reading paths on a comics page used a US convention environment and gathered eye-tracking data from comics readers, but his method of asking participants to number a blank panel grid lacked any comic to read. This could be considered a way to prevent participants becoming engrossed in or distracted by the comic that should fill those panels, but in itself is devoid of comic to read so cannot be conflated with reading. The Comics Convention Project: Eye-Tracking and Comics (Tatler 2015) has gone beyond this in using video glasses to observe reading paths in published comics by tracking readers' eye movements, though as far as I can tell their Thought Bubble 2016 stall offered a demonstration of technology and method rather than undertaking data collection. This is not to deny the potential of eyetracking methods. Stickler and Shi's (2016) exploration of eye tracking advocated for this method's compatibility with a sociocultural paradigm as part of a mixed methods approach: their data on language teachers' eye movements during online teaching is indeed a multimodal context, but not directly related to reading or to comics. Other approaches to investigating specific fan communities, whether as Jenkins' academic-fan acafan (Jenkins 1992) or sociologist (Brienza 2010; Dan Perkel as interviewed by Owens 2012) have built on a long lineage of studying individual and group identity, treating comics as a subculture (Hebdige 1979). There is however widespread anecdotal evidence of comics creators and readers rejecting the designation of comics as a genre or subculture, preferring an articulation of comics as a medium used to create works in a vast range of visual and narrative styles (for example, Meconis 2012). Moreover, a sociocultural approach shows that identity is socially-constructed and learning cannot take place in a vacuum (Leonardo and Manning 2017), thus questioning whether presenting a subculture as the area of study is possible without at least acknowledging the permeability of its boundaries.

My approach to doing research at a comics convention differs by approaching comics at the level of a medium, to ask readers what they read and only then explore their readings of specific titles in more depth. My focus is on how what readers read influences their constructions of understanding and identity. This differs profoundly from equating eye tracking with reading, or fandom affiliation with social construction of identity: my focus is the individual construction of understanding and identity within a social context, not the abstracted mechanics of reading. My approach to studying

comics builds on sociocultural theories of learning (Vygotsky 1978; Wells 1999) rooted in the field of education, with a focus on how the construction of understanding happens at the level of values that then drive belief and action (Joas 2008). This recruitment phase is vital to my research in connecting with readers, to open a conversation and establish a population of comics readers from which to then recruit participants for my main stage of data collection. It is in that main stage that I plan to access rich and complex data far beyond what I could gather using a questionnaire at a busy comics convention. Fig 2 shows a summary of the stages of my data collection, with the size of each box indicating the amount of data as a proportion of this research project.

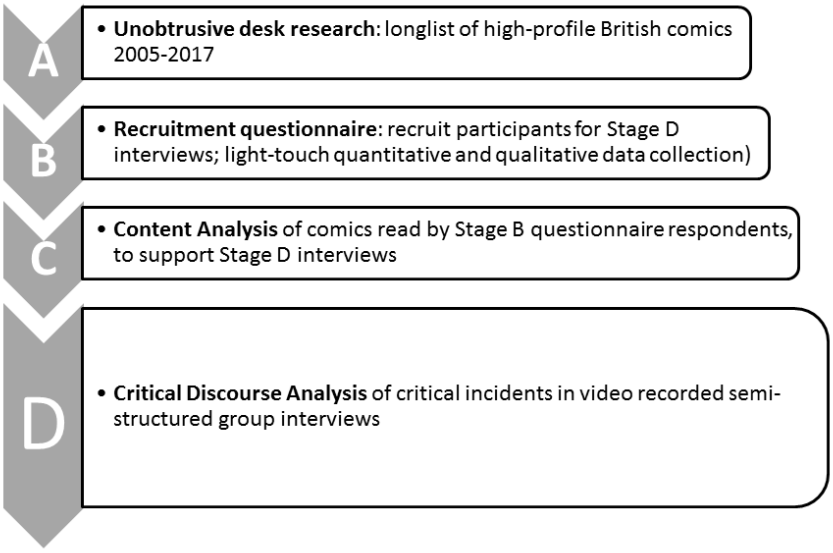


Figure 3: Stage ABCD data collection

**Part 3: Whose comics, and whose readings?**

There is precedent for reader-focussed approaches to studying comics. Gibson's (2015) oral history of girls' comics explored adults' recollections of their childhood reading. Wertham's (1955) research, now discredited for his falsification of findings (Tilley 2012), nevertheless began with progressive methods including asking children which comics they chose to read. Nor is my desire to work with experienced comics readers unique to my work: consider a focus on undergraduates 'who were familiar with Peanuts comic sequences' by Cohn *et al* (2012). Foulsham and colleagues (Foulsham *et al.* 2016) went further still in proposing an equation to distinguish between novice and experienced readers, whereas Bateman's team (Bateman *et a*l 2016) admonished coding novices for incorrect identification of aspects of a comics page. I disagree with these approaches' priorities in assigning a

numeric value to fundamentally qualitative questions of on the one hand confidence in one's own reading, and on the other hand the display and recognition of that reading expertise by others. Whiteley (2011) has shown the distinction between 'professional' and 'non-professional' readers as a barrier to engagement in reading groups. The dominance of standardised tests of reading ability continues though their validity has been challenged (Gibbs and Julian 2015). Moreover such measures focus on literacy in reading words, not the multimodal literacy (Jacobs 2013) used when reading comics.

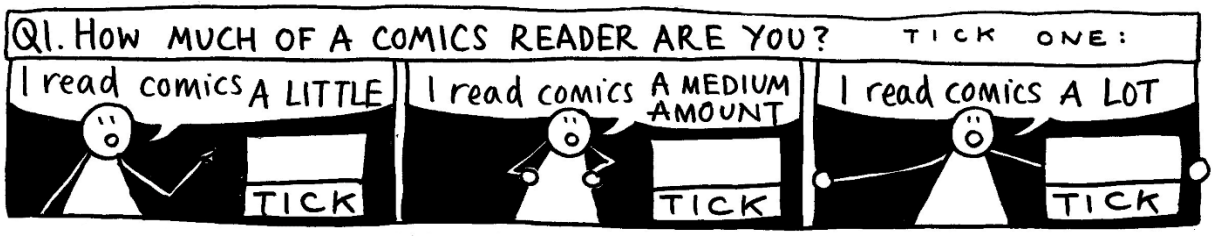


**Figure 4: 'How much of a comics reader are you? Tick one': extract from Stage A questionnaire**

Better suited to my research, I argue, is a blunt categorisation of 'a little, a medium amount, a lot' (Fig 4), to gently prompt respondents to self-assess their comics reading by their own criteria according to my quantification. Are you a self-professed prolific comics reader rather than, for example, a reluctant convention attendee only accompanying friends or family? My categorisation is not a routing question that would alter respondents' pathway through the questionnaire, and does not allow a response of 'not at all'. The prevalence of comics in mainstream and specialist news media, online, and in advertising can make it hard to avoid reading comics, and my recruitment questionnaire addresses this 'hiding in plain sight' in two ways. This first (cover) page legitimates a range of levels of comics readership without using terms that can be considered stigmatising: geek, nerd, comics reader, or even comics reader. It also includes a clear consent statement, both for research ethics purposes and considering recent attention to consent in photography and behaviour at comics conventions (Asselin 2014; Dockterman 2014). The middle page includes newspapers in a provisional list of comics titles – I will discuss this list in more detail later in this paper - to prompt recollection that newspapers often include comics as political cartoons, strip cartoons, or journalism and comment in comics form without implying that newspapers are themselves comics (though as multimodal texts, their juxtaposition and interdependence of words and images could be considered closer to comics than, say, a prose novel). The final page asks for context: what else readers read, whether they talk about what they read, and demographic information.

There are many understandings of 'British comics': laments for the demise of British comics as a struggling weekly publications industry particularly for action and war stories (Notton 2011);

nostalgia for pre-magazine girls' comics (Gibson 2015); a contemporary push for canonisation of British graphic novels as distinct from comics for 'the Marvel-collecting masses' (Taylor 2009; also Miodrag 2013); recognition for small press comics (Oliver 2016); and digital comics (Goodbrey 2013) and growth of webcomics (Pipedream Comics 2017). Freeman's (2017) overview on British comics fan site *Down The Tubes* is a particularly useful point of entry. The extent to which the comics industry relies on global networks of creation and readership – both in print and digitally - again complicates narrow conceptions of British comics. This is not new, thinking of 1970s demand from British comics publications for Spanish artists (Roach 2017) and 1950s selective moral panic in Britain around US horror comic imports and reprints (Barker 1984). There is a comparable breadth of definitions for comics. I prefer to understand comics as a medium, acknowledging but questioning marketing terms such as graphic novel, one-shot, series, trilogy, story comic. Specific points in my questionnaire designed to prompt this broad understanding of comics include an image of comics as an umbrella term for many classifications (Fig 5), and a categorisation of comics by length rather than status (Fig6).

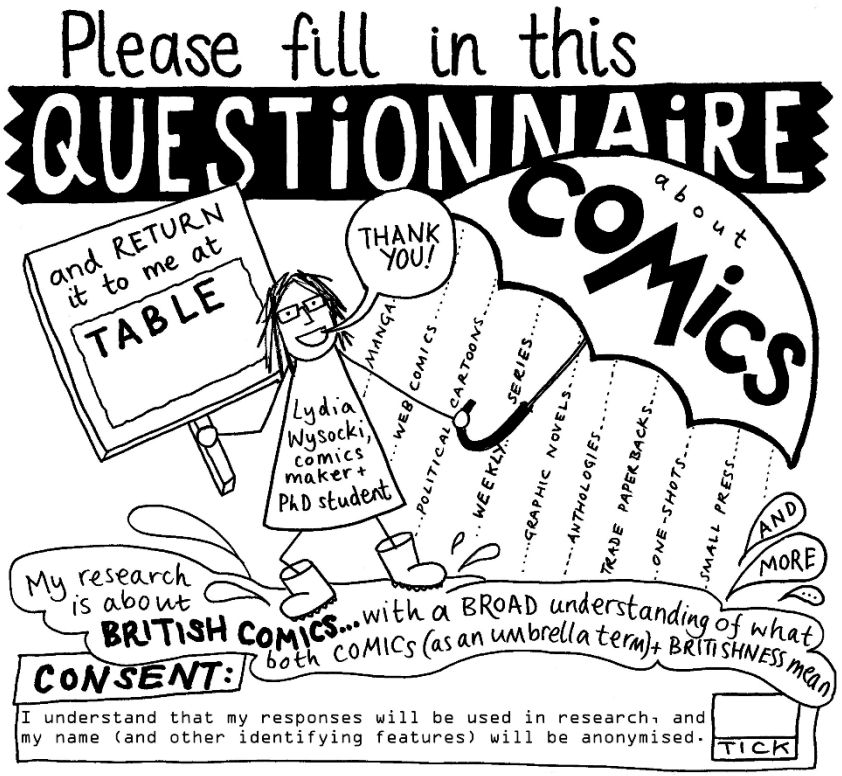


**Figure 5: comics as an umbrella term: extract from Stage A questionnaire**

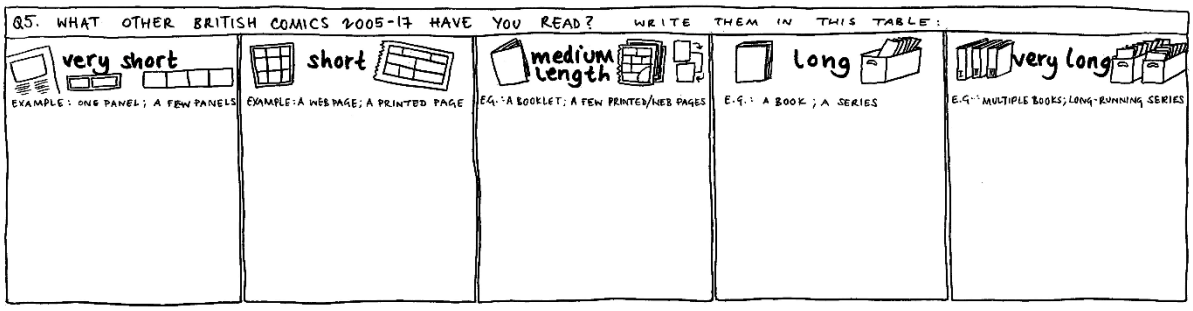


**Figure 6: classification of comics by length: extract from Stage A questionnaire**

This terminology moves away from a focus only on marketing language used with the print capitalist comics industry to consider the breadth of comics as a medium. Printing and distribution methods have shaped the evolution of the comics medium (Waugh 1947; Benjamin 1973), and continue to do so in digital and online comics (Goodbrey 2013). To pursue a study only within the capitalist criteria of the most profitable, most widely-circulated comics, would be unable to address my focus on readers' readings of comics. Consider, for example, Kehily's (1999) evidence on groups of teenagers' negotiated readings of magazines, and Hunt's (2002) presentation of the reappropriation of Hergé's *Tintin au Congo* (1946 [2005]) by parents who use the comic to educate their children about European colonisation. Consider also the anarchist reworking of *Tintin* in the name of class struggle (Daniels 1989; fig. 7), and Pepe the Frog's journey from Matt Furie's 'peaceful frog-dude' (Furie, quoted in Flood 2017) to far right meme (Nagle 2017). It is in readers' negotiated and oppositional readings, and in appropriations and repurposing, that both the emancipatory and repressive potential of comics and other multimodal media can be seen. Whilst close academic readings of a given comic can offer critique that strengthens both academic work and comics practice, the choice of titles to critique itself belies assumptions – whether made explicit or kept hidden – of which comics titles merit study, and which themes they speak to. Enabling this choice of focus to be led by participants in my research project affords comics readers not only a choice of titles that will be discussed in the main stage of my data collection but also a role in setting the boundaries of my project.


**Figure 7: Anarchist appropriation of *Tintin* (p.41, Daniels 1989)**

Whilst nationalism can function as a unifying force, my focus in this 2005-17 period is on the insidious use of nationalism as a divisive force even as it claims to unite and protect. Britishness is itself a variously-defined term. It has been articulated as, among other things: nostalgia for cricket, village greens, and Empire by former Prime Minister John Major (quoted in Cruse 2008); a political project of multiculturalism (Parekh 2000); and now the UK government's Prevent strategy's definition of Fundamental British Values:

> 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs.' (May 2011)

As Bolloten and Richardson (2015) point out, there is little uniquely British to these statements. Their status as fundamental or values also merits critique, particularly from an education standpoint now that upholding FBVs forms part of teachers' professional obligations (Smith 2013): the issue is not only the legal letter of Prevent as government policy but also how its exclusionary discourses permeate our lives. This urgent work is underway in education research about teacher education and classroom practice (see Lander 2016). A next step is to appreciate that the processes by which people of all ages learn understandings of national identity are much broader than only through classroom education. Meaning is embedded in the visual and verbal language we use. In reading comics, complex representations in words and pictures present or reaffirm to readers an understanding of what it is, and what it looks like, to be British. If the reader and everyone they interact with fits comfortably within the representations they encounter, they might never question the definitions that underpin these depictions. If the reader or anyone they interact with is excluded by the representations they encounter, or is pushed to the margins of what is considered British, this could affect their own sense of belonging and how that goes on to be enacted in everyday life. Intentional discrimination is but one part of this; unconscious discrimination and bias can normalise

inequitable representations, making it more difficult (but no less urgent) to expose and eradiate unfairness in favour of fairness.

Earlier in this section I referred to a multiplicity of understandings of 'British comics' and the comics medium, noting that not all scholars, publishers, or indeed readers, take a broad view of what counts as a comic. If a prevailing understanding that 'comics' primarily or only refers to print weekly comics anthologies is left unchallenged, this could blinker the beholder to evolving and emerging styles of comics and choices of publishing routes. It might not be that British comics is struggling, but that it has changed. In this sense comics can offer a window into larger societal issues: if a prevailing understanding of Britishness is left unexplored, not only comics but people are overlooked. The effects of this inclusion and exclusion are considered in Chetty's (2016) work on children's literature in the UK. It becomes the difference between being included as citizens or shunned as outsiders – or attacked, as seen in recent media reports of acid attacks targeted at 'south Asians or 'Muslim looking people'.' This wording is quoted from an article in the *Independent* (Lusher 2017) to show the publication of reports of experiences and speculation that conflate appearance and religion; I quote it here not to reinforce this conflation but to show its prevalence. Even without resorting to bodily violence, stereotyped representations of 'British people' in comics and other media present and reinforce normed understandings of who has a central or a marginalised role in life, education, and work. As a Critical Whiteness Studies approach (Delgado and Stefancic 1997) shows, this reinforcement and perpetuation of structural inequities is far more insidious than occasional, necessary, purges of intentionally racist depictions. This argument will form a larger part of my thesis, but I minimise it here to maintain my focus on research methods. Any of these, or other, definitions of Britishness and of comics might not be the same as other readers' preferred definitions. Whilst it would be naïve to suggest I can entirely step outside my own understandings, by engaging with a range of definitions I can better identify my own partiality and thus better engage with other people's partiality.

There is no definitive list of British comics. Claims of '[a] list of all known British comics' ('British Comics' 2017) belie narrow definitions of what can be considered a British comic; other projects specify a focus on their own designation of 'classic British comics' (Stringer 2017) or are by their nature a work in progress (UK Comics Wiki 2017). The British Library's collection (British Library 2017) has strengths in the early history of comics but is limited by its reliance on newspaper and legal deposit obligations for the proportion of comics that are published with an ISBN, not a full engagement with comics as a medium. My aim in including specific titles in my questionnaire has not been to synthesise such a list. I argue that there is a usefulness to a prompt offering an incomplete

framework to focus respondents' minds, particularly in a busy convention environment with a particular emphasis on promoting new comics. My research does not have the entry barrier of a memory test of which comics were published in which year, nor does it expect or reward encyclopaedic knowledge of comics trivia. The Forbidden Planet International Blog (Gordon 2005-2017) annual recap of contributors' favourite comics is a resource I found useful prior to my PhD in developing my understanding of the scope of the British comics industry and choosing comics to read. Returning to it as part of my PhD data collection, I read Richard Bruton's (2010) musings on what the list could and could not achieve:

> 'I thought it would be interesting to tot up the various Best Of Year posts we've had from people this year. … Now, before you start thinking this is some serious piece of analysis I should point out all of the ways we all managed to conspire to make this nothing more than an interesting list of different titles rather than some kind of "Best Of The Best"… So bearing in mind how wonderfully error strewn this is and how it stands up to rigorous statistical and mathematical analysis about as well as Conservative budgetary policy for 2010/2011 stands up to the use of a calculator and common sense – let's go' (Bruton 2010).

I agree that the sourcing of items for the FPI Blog's list was not a rigorously-collected dataset, and nor should it be. As such any attempted statistical analysis would lack validity. A tally frequency chart is a blunt quantitative method that alone does not answer the subjective question of which comics are 'good' or 'bad', but does give an indication of which comics titles received acclaim from reviewers and promoters in a given time period. Within a print capitalist industry this publicity drives sales and has an influence on the British comics industry, so is an indication of titles' visibility in the marketplace. Building on Bruton's (*ibid*.) approach in counting how many contributors nominated which comics titles is also an opportunity to consider what social science research methods can offer to the development of knowledge about British comics. This is particularly relevant to the field of comics studies as specialist knowledge about comics is not only an academic preserve but developed by a mix of readers, scholars with and without academic qualifications and affiliations, and archivists whether with climate-controlled rooms or stacks of musty boxes.

I expanded this compiled comics titles from other UK-based comics reviews available online, limiting my focus to series of reviews on comics journalism and reviews websites, or comics-focussed series within larger websites operational for at least one year of my 2005-2017 timeframe series, excluding personal blogs to focus on sites publishing writing by multiple readers and reviewers. A full list is included as Appendix I. These included: FPI Blog, Down the Tubes, the Guardian website's comics tag and Graphic Novel of the Month review series, and Page 45 Comic Book of the Month Club. I also

included award and reading scheme nominations, which again included multiple readers' and reviewers' opinions: Broken Frontier Awards, British Comic Award and Young People's Comic Award, Eagle Awards, Cartoonist of the Year category of the Press Awards, Comics Laureate, SICBA Comic Book Awards, Excelsior and Excelsior Junior Award. All of these are UK-based sources; many but not all of them included an explicit focus on 'British comics', though in most cases without an explicit definition of that term. Again, I aimed to include a range of credible sources of lists of titles, without judging the choices they provided.

Of the 846 titles in this list, only 65 titles occurred three times or more; I included in my questionnaire the 35 titles that occurred 4 times or more, refining this further. This show there was little consensus among reviewers and award schemes: there is a range of comics titles receiving attention. Without losing sight of its limitations, could this longlist be useful beyond its intended role as a prompt for questionnaire respondents? Formatted as a spreadsheet it appears ripe for further quantitative analysis to explore whether this snapshot of high-profile British comics represents a demographically diverse range of creators, but this curiosity soon reaches an impasse. To churn these data further would require further demographic data on the featured comics, whether focusing on their creators or the characters contained within them. Even in cases where self-reported biographical information is easily accessible online, a quick count of for example the gender of these comics creators would ignore the performative aspects of identity; attributing a race, class, or other demographic category would be a similarly flawed approach. Comics creators' own identification with - or rejection of - social constructions of race and class might or might not overlap with the categories attributed to them by readers. Such a method would fail to give a meaningful account of the multifaceted, intersectional, nature of identity as shaped by social forces, reinforcing my decision to focus on readers' readings and how these inform readers' own constructions of national identity. It would also be incomplete without an exploration of the financial and social capital invested in making and promoting comics, so again blunt quantitative methods can only go so far before a more nuanced qualitative approach comes into play.

There are nevertheless some curiosities that this inconsistent longlist uncovered. There are many ways to not call a comic a comic: articles and reviews from the Guardian typically referred to comic books, graphic books, graphic novels, graphic memoirs, though only rarely as comics without some other qualifier. The categorisation of 'British' was similarly fraught. Work by comics creator Anja Uhren was included on Broken Frontier website's 'Ten UK small press comics you need to own' (Oliver 2017). As a German citizen living and working in the UK and a recent UK graduate (Uhren

2017), Uhren's work would however be ineligible for the British Comic Awards which in recent years included a residency clause:

> Nominees for the British Comic Awards must be the work of a British* based creative team, and the rights to such work should belong to either the creators or a UK publisher. Work by non-UK citizens is eligible *if they have resided in the UK for over 3 years outside of education*. … * Where we refer to British we're referring to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. (British Comic Awards 2014, *emphasis added*)

In attempting a clear cutoff for eligibility, the BCA committee's criteria's focus on the nationality of comics creators and their publishers shows how legalistic language is absorbed into other contexts: the three-year residency stipulation mirrors UK Council for International Student Affairs guidance on student Home or Overseas fee status criteria as set by the governments of the four countries of the UK (UKCISA 2017). The BCA website is, at the time of writing, defunct so it is unclear whether this clause will be used in any subsequent years of the awards scheme. Not all titles on my longlist could be classified so neatly. Muddling lines of national identity, race, and gender, White British male comics creator Bryan Talbot published *Metronome* (2008) under the pseudonym Veronique Tanaka. Whilst this change of gender received some lighthearted comment (Holland, n.d.), that his decision to also play with constructions of national identity and ethnicity was presented as no more than 'a bit of a joke' (Talbot quoted in Ó Méalóid 2009) prompts me to wonder whether the same choices today would still receive an uncritical response. At the time of writing the unmasking of Marvel comics Editor in Chief CB Cebulski for work created under his earlier appropriative and intentionally deceptive pseudonym Akira Yoshida is very much in progress (Johnston 2017).

**Part 4: Reflections on a work in progress**

This list remains only part of a recruitment questionnaire that is only a stepping stone to build the connections that will afford access to richer data on different readers' readings of the British comics that matter to them. Whilst it is too early to publish findings from my in-progress PhD research, I can share some insights from this initial stage of data collection and my use of a comics-format questionnaire as a data collection instrument. Over the two days of the convention I collected 109 completed questionnaires; a subsequent day of fieldwork a month later at Leeds City Library yielded 26 completed questionnaires, showing that the convention had a far higher response rate. Almost all of these completions were done at my convention table, and as far as possible I insisted that respondents completed questionnaires at my table both to minimise the risk of questionnaires not

being returned and so I could respond to any queries. When respondents were equally insistent that they wanted to take the questionnaire away to return later I allowed this, to prioritise positive interactions with respondents: of those four questionnaires one respondent returned the questionnaire to my table, a second returned it with profuse apologies for absent-mindedly wandering away, a third returned it by post after the event, and a fourth failed to return it. In a busy convention marquee my table was consistently busy across the two days with respondents using one of my three clipboards or additional space on the table; other attendees returned to complete a questionnaire later in the day as they made multiple circuits of the convention. This number (n=109) of completed questionnaires, and that almost all respondents completed all questions in the questionnaire, shows that the questionnaire was indeed an effective data collection instrument in a comics convention environment.

But who were these respondents and what comics did they say they read? In response to the question 'How much of a comics reader are you?' (fig. 4), 22 of 109 (20%) said they were 'a little' of a comics reader, 46 of 109 (42.2%) said 'a medium amount', and 41 of 109 (38%) said 'a lot'. Having shown in part 1 of this article that this is a non-probability sample without statistical generalisability, it does suggest these respondents had a range of levels of readership of comics. Further demographic data on the identity of respondents was collected through open questions (write-in responses) and is essential to the next stage of my research recruitment process; to summarise this as headline numbers at this point in my research would undercut the complexity I intend to explore at later stages. The five-column classification of comics by length (fig. 6) gathered, as expected, examples to show that not all respondents categorised the same comics in the same way. For example, work by comics creator John Allison was categorised by different respondents as very short, short, medium length, long, or very long comics, with references to both specific series and his whole body of work; this could refer to the different digital and print publication formats including 4-panel daily extracts, issues in a series, full series, or the 'shared universe' (Allison 2016) of Allison's Tackleford comics series since 1998, and as such shows that further discussion with respondents would be needed to ascertain detail after this initial broad questionnaire. The questionnaire also gathered responses that start to question what counts as a British comic, for example 'Not sure which are from the UK specifically!', and a few respondents asked me about this directly. Other responses further showed how complex this question can be. When individual respondents gave responses of Kate Beaton and Katsuhiro Otomo I initially assumed they had misread the question asking 'What other British comics 2005-17 have you read?', but when multiple respondents wrote down Bryan K Vaughan's *Saga* I questioned whether my own understanding of these comics creators (whom I understand to be respectively Canadian, Japanese, and American) was lacking. Whereas the

place of publication for print or digital comics can in most cases be clearly determined, this is not inevitably what is meant by 'British comics'. Even for examples of comics creative teams who are spread around the world, Britishness is not as clearcut as the country of citizenship of a given comic's creator(s) or publisher, their place of work, or any other single criterion. There is an underlying question of which comics creators and titles were not mentioned by respondents as they did not match understandings of what Britishness is, or that other creators and titles more readily came to mind. As I discussed in part three of this paper, the social construction of national identity has major implications for lived experiences of belonging and not belonging. This includes the roles of comics readers and creators as part of the comics industry, yet also affects and is affected by the world beyond comics.

This begins to move towards my intended later stages of research to explore this question of national identity in greater detail. It suggests that my initial questionnaire has had some success in broaching this larger discussion, but equally it is important to note a risk that the questionnaire alone has insufficiently problematized the question of what counts as a British comic. Happily, the majority of respondents (80 of 109) provided contact details as permission for me to include them in a population from which to recruit to my main interview stage of data collection, which will explore this and other issues in more detail. My aim for this stage has been to forge connections with readers, to build enough of a relationship to sustain the main phase of my data collection, which will comprise semi-structured group interviews with the initial gatekeeper reader and a small group of their comics-reading friends or acquaintances. This multi-layered approach is to support my focus on socially-constructed understandings of national identity in a context of heightened discourses of 'Britishness'.

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**Appendix I: list of longlist sources**

British Comic Award http://britishcomicawards.com [website no longer active]

Broken Frontier Awards http://www.brokenfrontier.com/broken-frontier-awards-2016/

Cartoonist of the Year category, Press Awards http://www.pressawards.org.uk/

Comics Laureate https://www.comicartfestival.com/project/uk-comics-laureate

Down the Tubes http://downthetubes.net/

Eagle Awards http://www.eagleawards.co.uk/

Excelsior Award http://www.excelsioraward.co.uk/ and Excelsior Junior Award http://www.excelsiorawardjunior.co.uk/

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FPI Blog http://forbiddenplanet.blog/

Guardian website's 'Comics and graphic novels' series https://www.theguardian.com/books/comics

Guardian website's Graphic Novel of the Month review series https://www.theguardian.com/books/series/graphic-novel-of-the-month

Page 45 Comic Book of the Month Club http://www.page45.com/store/comic-book-of-the-month.html

SICBA Comic Book Awards https://sicba.wordpress.com/

Young People's Comic Award http://thoughtbubblefestival.com/young-peoples-comic-awards/